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ABSTRACT

In 1997, the National Center for Family Literacy convened four state policymakers for an audioconference to discuss five issues related to family literacy and its role as a welfare reform strategy. First, with regard to the value of family literacy, policymakers saw literacy as the key to employment and job retention. Second, family literacy was a valid strategy for state welfare reform programs, because its components addressed various challenges faced by welfare families: adult education and work prep classes provided new workers with basic literacy and job skills; parent group addressed work maturity skills and offered peer support during transition to work; and parent and child interaction time established family relationships to withstand stress from change. Third, importance of collaboration with local welfare agencies was clear, because long-term success depended on collaboration with public and private organizations that support such services as transportation, substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health. Challenges for embedding family literacy into the welfare-to-work infrastructure included the following: raising family literacy awareness among service providers; revamping curriculum to include more work preparation; and program offerings at nontraditional hours. Ways to strengthen the connection between family literacy and welfare reform were through statewide or regional meetings and through accessing of surplus Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds to set up demonstration programs. (YLB)

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Family Independence Initiative Audioconference

December 18, 1997

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Family Literacy as a Welfare Reform Strategy

Family Independence Initiative Publication #2



National Center
for Family Literacy

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Overview

On December 18, 1997, the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) convened four state policy makers for an audioconference to discuss family literacy and its role as a welfare reform strategy. The audioconference is part of the Family Independence Initiative, a new approach to family literacy. The Initiative will take families from welfare to work while simultaneously strengthening those families and preparing their children for success in school. It will help design, establish and research pilot programs across the country that will be used as models for family literacy programs working within the new framework of welfare reform. A \$2.25 million grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation allowed NCFL to establish the Family Independence Initiative. The grant extends over a three-year period from 1997 through the year 2000.

Participants in the Audioconference

Leigh Bolick

Director of Program Development
with the Office of Family
Independence, SC Department
of Social Services

Tom Lugo

Administrator with the CA Department
of Education and Director of the
Elementary Academic Support Unit

Honorable Joan Lawrence

Ohio State Representative
Primary sponsor of the
welfare reform bill

Dr. Randy Whitfield

Associate Director of Basic Skills and
Human Resources Development,
NC Community College System

Moderator

Mary Gwen Wheeler

Policy and Program Specialist,
National Center for Family Literacy

The audioconference discussed five key questions:

1. What value does family literacy have for families who are on welfare?
2. Is family literacy a valid strategy that states can employ when putting together welfare reform programs?
3. How does family literacy fit into your state's welfare-to-work plan?
4. What are the opportunities and the challenges for imbedding family literacy into the welfare-to-work infrastructure that is currently being developed?
5. What kind of collaborations might strengthen the connection between family literacy and welfare reform?

As shown in the following summary from the audioconference, these state policy makers saw a clear role for family literacy as a viable route for families to make the jump from welfare to self-sufficiency. The four components of family literacy—adult education (which can include job training), parent groups (which build support networks and emphasize pre-employability and other life skills), parent and child interaction, and early childhood education all contribute to provide families with the tools and support they need to break the cycle of dependency.

The Value of Family Literacy for Welfare Families

*If we really want to help
people break the cycle of
illiteracy and break the
cycle of welfare dependency,
then we need to start with
educating the parents.*

—Randy Whitfield

Leigh Bolick

Family literacy holds considerable value for welfare reform efforts. Literate adults are employable adults. It's not just enough to employ clients, clients need to be employed in a position on a career path. If they can't read and they don't have the basic adult education skills, that's not very likely to happen. Family literacy includes parents involved with their children, which improves the quality of the relationship between the parent and child as well as their opportunities for learning. This can't be ignored by the welfare reform movement.

Tom Lugo

From an educational perspective, family literacy is critical to welfare reform and welfare families. Parents coming to school, involved in educational programs and with their children, is part of the whole welfare process. Family literacy has to play a major role in welfare reform. The objective is to take people off the welfare roles and place them into productive jobs. The cycle begins as soon as a child is born. By parental role modeling, children don't necessarily just do what you say, but they do what you do.

Joan Lawrence

A job is not easy to get or keep unless you are literate. In this respect, welfare reform and family literacy work well together. Welfare reform emphasizes "Work First" but family literacy can be combined with job requirements to break the cycle of dependency. It's a fortuitous time to be talking about family literacy.

Randy Whitfield

Family literacy programs can be instrumental in helping to break the cycle of illiteracy which is known to be intergenerational. With family literacy, the modeling is what is so important. If we really want to help people break the cycle of illiteracy and the cycle of welfare dependency, then we need to start with educating the parents. One of the benefits of family literacy programs is that the programs help individuals see that they really want more for themselves and more for their families than welfare.

Literacy is key to employment and the retention of jobs. Family literacy participants gain skills needed to obtain and retain meaningful employment, and their self-sufficiency then serves as a role model for their children. Family literacy's emphasis on parent/child involvement strengthens family connections that will motivate both parent and child to seek further learning opportunities.

Family Literacy— A Valid Strategy for State Welfare Reform Programs

*If we can find a way to
combine family literacy and
work experiences for these
people in family literacy
classes, we will be finding
the avenues that we need to
not only just get them in
any job, but to get them in
a job that will keep them
off welfare.*

—Randy Whitfield

Leigh Bolick

In South Carolina, family literacy programs are integrating with other components in order to make them countable for the work participation activity. The "Work First" philosophy will make it tricky to incorporate family literacy programs into welfare reform, but this can be very useful when the family literacy program is designed correctly. Family literacy education needs to be vocational or directly related to employment in all components. Relating them as closely as possible is crucial to obtaining and maintaining employment.

Tom Lugo

It would be simplistic to believe that the answer to welfare reform rests solely with education deemed sufficient to gain employment. Family literacy provides the role modeling that is so essential in breaking the cycle of welfare dependency. Most schools have not yet embraced the idea that they might take on the responsibility for family literacy—not just the literacy of the K-12 children or the children that come through their doors—but the family as a total unit.

Joan Lawrence

Money is available through TANF in the state of Ohio to pay for family literacy programs. If family literacy can be demonstrated to prove an effective means of moving families from welfare to work, then this product can be sold to the county level. If the agencies involved can see the advantages, they might be willing to cooperate and move ahead on a broader basis.

Randy Whitfield

The Division of Social Services in North Carolina has shown that 65% of the state's "Work First" participants lack the basic literacy skills to really keep a job. Family literacy programs are extremely motivating for parents. The self-esteem that parents get when they realize that they can learn will give them the confidence to get a job, and even get a better paying job, which then, hopefully, will break the welfare cycle.

The components of family literacy address the various challenges faced by welfare families. The adult education and work prep classes provide new workers with basic literacy and job skills. Parent group addresses work maturity skills and offers peer support during the critical transition to work. Parent and child interaction time establishes family relationships which withstand the stress brought on by change.

State Welfare-to-Work Plans and the Family Literacy Connection

Family literacy education needs to be vocational or directly related to employment in all components.

—Leigh Bolick

Leigh Bolick

It will be tricky with the "Work First" philosophy to incorporate family literacy programs with welfare reform but these programs can be greatly beneficial when the program is designed correctly. The Department of Social Services in South Carolina is using TANF funds for job-readiness activities in family literacy programs to relate learning more towards employment. Many states have surplus TANF dollars and it shouldn't be that difficult for family literacy providers to access some of that money.

Tom Lugo

The Department of Education in California just recently passed an assembly bill that contains the criteria the counties must use for their welfare reform. This bill also gives the Department of Social Services final approval for these county plans and the responsibility of designing or interjecting the kinds of things that must be done. The DSS needs to be educated about the philosophy and educational premise behind family literacy because they will be the ones making the decisions and recommendations.

Joan Lawrence

Inclusion of the following stipulation in Ohio's welfare reform bill opens the door for the family literacy concept to be adapted and expanded at local school sites. Language in the law states that schools and county welfare departments can negotiate contracts permitting the schools to become work sites for the 20 hours of work requirement. The remaining 10 hours of development activities would be involved in parenting education at the schools. Close connections between parent and child are kept because both would be attending the same school.

Randy Whitfield

Several companies in North Carolina are willing to put family literacy classes at the work site. Hopefully, these will become models that we can use throughout the state. Adult education is run through the community college system here which allows family literacy programs to tie into existing programs to help transition people into work.

The importance of collaboration with the local welfare agency is clear, since many states have devolved authority to the county level. Collaboration with the wide variety of public and private organizations that support services such as transportation, substance abuse, domestic violence and mental health, is critical to long-term success.

Opportunities and Challenges for Imbedding Family Literacy into the Welfare-to-Work Infrastructure

It would seem to me that one of the challenges is to get the attention of the other service providers.

—Joan Lawrence

Leigh Bolick

Family literacy can be combined with components like job-readiness which will allow adaptations such as reading the want ads and reading about job skills. Post-employment services and education should be provided during nontraditional hours to allow welfare recipients to meet job requirements and still remain in school. Family literacy can become an integral part of job retention and career development, both of which are critical for improving the quality of life of TANF recipients.

Tom Lugo

One opportunity which would also prove a challenge would be to unite all of the social service agencies into a collaboration to support the individuals we want to help under welfare reform. Family literacy programs could be integrated with existing services. Healthy Start is a project recently initiated in California that will bring together the various providers through the medium of the school district to provide the services that families need.

Joan Lawrence

It would seem to me that one of the challenges is to get the attention of the other service providers that you need for family literacy programs. For example, in Ohio, we want to place parents in work sites at the schools, but convincing these schools to provide the space for the literacy programs may be difficult. One answer to convince these agencies to incorporate family literacy would be to demonstrate proven family literacy pilot programs.

Randy Whitfield

A nontraditional approach remains as one of our best opportunities to allow TANF recipients to meet their work requirements and still have access to family literacy programs. These programs can be offered at night or on the weekends. In North Carolina, adult education is run through the community college system, so this allows family literacy programs to connect with already existing programs to help people transition into work and to continue with their education after their initial job requirement is met.

One real challenge is raising family literacy awareness among the various service providers. Another challenge is to revamp curriculum to include more work preparation, including on-site experience and career exploration. It may be necessary to offer programs during nontraditional hours to accommodate the changing schedules of the adult learner. Collaboration takes a lot of effort, and because so many different service providers are connected to welfare reform, it is difficult to integrate plans.

Collaborations— Strengthening the Connection between Family Literacy and Welfare Reform

It would become our greatest opportunity—to be able to bring all the agencies together so that services could be provided to support all the individuals that we want to help under welfare reform.

—Tom Lugo

Leigh Bolick

The first step in making the connection between family literacy and welfare reform is to educate the Department of Human Services about family literacy. The agencies needed for collaboration should understand that family literacy is about more than adult education. They need to understand that family literacy is about parents and children, parenting and early childhood education as well. Employment-related activities can be added to family literacy programs to emphasize the importance of job retention and career development because these skills are critical to improving the quality of life for TANF recipients.

Tom Lugo

An effective process must be developed that would allow collaboration with existing agencies and service providers. The whole issue of family literacy, the philosophy and educational premise behind family literacy should be communicated to the Department of Social Services because this organization will have the greatest influence on designating collaborations.

Joan Lawrence

At a recent statewide meeting in Ohio, the directors of all the major state agencies listened to a keynote speech on the welfare reform issue. The attendees met all afternoon to make plans for their local communities. This collaboration spurred on by welfare reform is encouraging and perhaps—even though this is a small beginning—family literacy can draw the attention of other service providers to become an integral part of program planning.

Randy Whitfield

Collaboration among agencies is essential for family literacy to succeed as a strategy for welfare reform. Regional meetings that bring people together from different social service agencies have already acted as catalysts for local communities to implement their own programs.

One way to strengthen the connection between family literacy and welfare reform is through statewide and/or regional meetings. These meetings can spur local communities to establish collaborative initiatives in their areas. Another suggestion is to access the surplus TANF funds to set up demonstration programs. Most states have excess funds due to the rapid decline of welfare rolls and are open to addressing long-term self-sufficiency issues.

Conclusion

The audioconference revealed strong state-level support of family literacy as an important welfare-to-work strategy. The panelists argued that family literacy's components fill the need to provide long-lasting change from one generation to the next while still remaining adaptable to new welfare reform work requirements.

Family literacy programs which involve both the parent and child are essential if the cycle of welfare dependency is to be broken. To better prepare the adult learner for future employment, job skills and occupational training are taught during literacy classes. These parents who are learning and preparing for self-sufficiency become wonderful role models for their children. Family literacy's emphasis on parent/child involvement strengthens family connections that will motivate both parent and child to seek further learning opportunities.

The "Work First" philosophy for many of the states' welfare reform programs necessitates that family literacy programs be provided during nontraditional evening and weekend hours to accommodate the changing schedules of the adult learner. Because of time restrictions and allowable "countable activities," the literacy instruction itself should be work-oriented and taught in the context of work or occupational training. Existing family literacy programs should remain flexible enough to allow changes in curriculum to satisfy welfare reform requirements.

The money and opportunity for creating and expanding family literacy programs exists in many states through excess TANF funds. Before these funds are freely allocated to family literacy programs, local social service organizations need to see the connection between family literacy and welfare reform. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is by demonstrating model sites that can then be used throughout the state. The business community has also responded to welfare reform by working with family literacy programs, in the classroom and at the work site, creating a favorable environment for job training and retention that has benefited both employers and families.

One real challenge for family literacy will be to get the attention of other social service agencies. These agencies have a false perception of family literacy as a "soft" program, not realizing how effectively family literacy responds to some of their more immediate areas of concern like job placement quotas. Family literacy can easily be integrated into existing programs by bringing all of the components together into a cohesive unit that will more completely address the many issues facing welfare reform.

The new welfare reform environment has made it imperative that agencies and organizations collaborate to achieve results. Family literacy has long been a model for collaboration, having connected adult educators and job trainers together with family support agencies and child care professionals. At the local level where welfare reform is taking place, this model of collaboration will be essential if people on the welfare rolls are to achieve self-sufficiency and hope for a better tomorrow.

About NCFL

The National Center for Family Literacy is a nonprofit organization founded in 1989. We are the leader of and a resource for family literacy nationwide. We are the corporate embodiment of a concept to bring parents and children to school together, providing hope, self-sufficiency and a brighter future for both generations. This vision underlies all of our work as we promote policies at the national and state levels to support family literacy; design, develop and demonstrate new family literacy practices for replication; deliver high quality, dynamic, research-based training, staff development and technical assistance; and conduct research to expand the knowledge base of family literacy.

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**National Center
for Family Literacy**

325 W. Main St., Suite 200

Louisville, KY 40202-4251

(502) 584-1133

fax: (502) 584-0172

e-mail: ncfl@famlit.org

www.famlit.org

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